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I’m a miner. I dig holes for a living. ‘Dig’ is a generous word, really. I blow things up so we can go deeper. Drill, charge, blast then bog it out. Then repeat. It’s loud, dirty, and dangerous. But it’s honest work, and there’s a rhythm to it, one that makes sense. Until the day it didn’t

The mine is called Kalgara Deep, carved beneath the sun-blasted hills of Western Australia, three hours from the nearest servo, and six from anything you could call a town. It’s not on any tourist map. Just a dot behind a red dirt road

lined with scrub and ghost gums, baking under the kind of heat that feels like a punishment.

Above ground, there’s nothing but flat country, shimmering mirages, and the low growl of LandCruisers kicking up clouds. Below, it’s another world entirely. Black, hot, pressurized. Like working inside the lungs of a sleeping beast.

The decline spirals down like a corkscrew, levels branching off like arteries. On the walls, streaks of ironstone and quartz run like veins, whispering of wealth. But all I see is rock. Rock that hates us.

We live in its shadow, day in, day out. The walls we drill into are older than time, but they shift and breathe when they think we’re not looking. Miners don’t talk much about it, but we all feel it. The weight of the mountain above. The way it presses down on your shoulders. The way the ground moans when no one’s talking.

The crew, well, they’re part of the mine too. Worn, thick-skinned, most of them. Sun-cracked knuckles, tattoos faded by lime dust and sun. We come from everywhere—Kalgoorlie, Perth, Darwin, Broken Hill. Some from Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Fiji. All

of us pulled in by the promise of cash and a kind of brutal peace. Down here, nothing matters except the job. It’s simple. Honest.

It’s The Deep.

It started like any other swing. Seven-on, seven-off, twelve hours at a time. I’d had my coffee on the bus in, made the usual groggy jokes with the crew, and geared up for the pre-start. Another day, another meter into the rock.

No Shortcuts.

No Shit.

This wasn’t my first rodeo. I’ve been charging faces for over a

decade. You get a feel for the place after that long. The way the ground breathes, the way it creaks and pops when it’s restless. That morning felt normal. Almost too normal. The kind of quiet you don’t notice until later, when you’re trying to remember what warning signs you missed.

The headings were deep, past 1000 meters. Hot, humid, still. My offsider, Davey, had cracked a joke about the air being thick enough to drink. We were loading up the cut at the end of the 5065 decline, getting ready for the next blast. The drillers had done a clean job. I was priming the holes while Davey

stood back, leaning against the wall and fanning himself with his helmet like an idiot.

“You reckon if we keep going down, we’ll pop out in China?” Davey asked, grinning through the dust.

I slid a booster into place and didn’t look up. “We’ll hit hell first.”

He flicked a bit of rock off his glove and leaned back against the wall. “You ever think we’re not meant to be down here?”

I glanced over. “What, spiritually?”

“Nah,” he said. “Biologically. Evolution and all that. We’ve got

fur, lungs, daylight eyes. We’re built for the surface.”

I wiped sweat from my eyes and smiled. “Speak for yourself. I reckon we’re cockroaches. We’ll outlast everything.”

He let out a short laugh, and I joined him. It wasn’t really a joke, but sometimes down here, you laugh to keep your hands steady.

By mid-shift, I was heading back to the charge-up ute to grab more leads when I felt it.

The ground didn’t rumble. It lurched. Like something beneath us had rolled over in its sleep. My knees buckled and I hit the wall,

arms outstretched. Dust dropped from the backs and ribs like flour off a sieve. The lights flickered, once, then held steady. The hum of the vent fans dipped in pitch for a second… like they were choking.

Davey radioed me immediately. “What the hell was that? You feel that?”

I did. And I didn’t answer right away because I was waiting—listening for the aftershock. You get little shifts underground all the time. Some you feel, some you don’t. But this… this was something else.

“I’m heading to the refuge chamber,” I said, already turning on my heel. “Get moving.”

Refuge chambers are lifelines down here. Sealed, pressurized shipping containers stocked with air, water, and food. They’re what you run to when everything else goes to shit. And on that day, everything was starting to smell like shit.

I reached the chamber before the second shift hit. This one wasn’t a lurch—it was a roar. The walls groaned like a sinking ship. Somewhere up the drive, I heard rock shearing—snapping—like bones under strain. I slammed the

chamber door shut, twisted the handle, and felt the chamber pressurize around me. Safe.

Or at least, that’s what I told myself.

I sat. Waited. And in that silence, I realised something: This place—this metal box, buried a kilometre underground…. it remembers things.

The scratched initials on the wall. The tally marks carved into the edge of the bench. The corner where someone drew a heart and a date: M + C, 2021. All little echoes of people who’ve waited here

before, not knowing if they’d ever see the surface again.

Time does weird things in a refuge chamber. The chamber’s small, maybe four meters across. Pale walls. A metal bench. Oxygen cylinders stacked like spare coffins. A scrubber that hisses and sighs. A manual on the wall with cheerful diagrams and colour-coded instructions that assume you’re calm and not seconds from losing your mind. There’s no natural light. The air is dry, recycled, slightly metallic. At first, I kept busy. I radioed control, checked supplies, monitored the CO2 scrubber. But when I stopped moving, my

thoughts started. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

I think that’s when the mine became a person to me. Not just a jobsite. A presence. A memory-keeper. A judge.

It knew me. It knew the way I swore under my breath before every ignition. It knew how I sang stupid 80s songs while laying emulsion just to keep my nerves steady. It knew I’d missed my daughter’s birthday last week. Knew I hadn’t called my mum in over a month. Knew I was tired. So goddamn tired.

I lay back against the wall and closed my eyes. Outside, the earth shifted again. A soft tremble, like a stomach rumble.

The mine was hungry.

I wasn’t supposed to be the one stuck down here, waiting to see if the mine would collapse or hold. I was supposed to finish my shift, catch the bus back to camp, microwave some shitty pasta, and fall asleep watching old footy highlights. That was the plan.

Instead, I was alone. Sweating through my overalls. Trying not to think about the hundred thousand tonnes of rock above me.

Wondering if Davey made it to another chamber. Wondering if he was dead.

I started counting things.

There were seven oxygen cylinders.

Fourteen ration packs.

Three jerry cans of water.

One toilet bucket.

No windows.

No clocks.

And a growing sense that time was bending in here. Ten minutes felt like an hour. An hour felt like nothing at all. The only measure

was the LED panel, which blinked its green reassurance over and over: SAFE - PRESSURISED - STABLE.

I didn’t feel stable.

I started talking to myself. First out loud, then inside my head. It was a trick I’d learned in my first year underground—keep talking, keep sane. But it didn’t help this time. Not when the quiet was so loud it felt like it was pressing in through the walls.

I laughed. Actually laughed. The kind that sounds too loud in a sealed room. “Losing it already,” I said out loud, just to test if I still

could. My voice came back strange. Flattened. Hollow.

The lights flickered again. Just once, like an eye half-blinking.

I pressed my back harder to the cold chamber wall. Tried to focus on the things I could see. The metal. The bench. The laminated evac sheet. Anything solid. Anything real.

But the mine… it had other plans.

A vibration ran up the soles of my boots. Subtle. Musical, almost. Like a low note struck on a cello. Then another. Louder. Closer. I felt it not in my ears, but in my ribs. Like it was playing me.

I stood, heart hammering, trying to guess if it was another tremor. But it wasn’t. The floor wasn’t shaking. The walls weren’t shifting.

The sound was.

It was like the mine was breathing again. Slowly. In. Out. The air moved, not from the scrubber, but from the very rock itself. A warm current, like an exhale from deep within the stone.

I pressed my hand to the wall.

It pulsed.

Just once.

I pulled away fast, stumbling back. Dust sifted down from the seams in

the ceiling, catching in the emergency light.

And that’s when I heard the tap.

Just once. Sharp. Deliberate.

It came from the outer wall, right by the air vent. I froze.

Another tap. Closer.

I moved to the door, pressed my ear against the seam.

Nothing.

Then—tap tap tap.

Three, in rhythm. Like knuckles on metal.

I grabbed the radio. “Is anyone outside? This is Chamber 5. Hello?”

Nothing but static.

The tapping stopped.

I stared at the door for a long time. Too long. Long enough that the silence afterward felt like mockery. Like the rock was laughing at me.

I didn’t sleep. Couldn’t.

The taps didn’t come back, but the idea of them did. Echoed around my head like ghosts of sound. Maybe it was the air getting to me. Maybe someone else was outside, trapped, lost, dying. Maybe I was the one who didn’t make it out, and this was what the afterlife looked like—metal walls, stale oxygen,

and the creeping certainty that none of it mattered.

I don’t know how long it had been, but suddenly I heard it again. The tapping. But this time it was different. It was faster. Aggressive.

The light changed.

TAP TAP TAP.

And then I heard footsteps.

Not boots on metal. Bare feet on stone. Deliberate. Slow. Coming from inside the mine. From the sealed corridor beyond where the door stood firm.

That was when I stopped thinking like a miner. Stopped thinking like

a man. Started thinking like part of the place. Like a cell in a body that had decided to grow around me.

like a cockroach.

The footsteps stopped just outside where the door should be.

Silence. Then..

TAP TAP TAP.

A voice, low and calm, that didn’t echo but landed directly in my chest:

“You came too deep.”

I backed away, heart clawing at my ribs. “Who’s there?” I asked, though I didn’t want an answer.

“You don’t remember,” it said. “But the mine does. It remembers everything you bury.”

TAP TAP TAP

I blinked. Rubbed my eyes.

When I opened them again, the door was gone.

Not blown open. Not caved in.

Just… gone. Replaced by a solid, seamless, rock wall. No seam, no handle. No escape.

TAP TAP TAP.

Thick cracks appeared in the bare stone wall, I saw movement, shapes forming in the rock, pressed faces in the ore, hands reaching

through seams in the stone. They weren’t ghosts, exactly. More like fossils trying to come back.

One of them looked like Davey.

One looked like my father.

One looked like me.

The mine was showing me things. All the things I’d buried. Arguments. Accidents. That one time I skipped checking the heading bolts to catch smoko early. The lie I told to keep the bonus. The way I joked when that kid got airlifted out after the charge misfire. My regrets were etched in these walls. Preserved in strata like core samples.

And the mine was reading them.

The voice came again.

“Do you want out?”

I didn’t answer.

“DIG.”

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I don’t know how long I was down there before the rescue crew arrived. Could’ve been five hours. Could’ve been twenty. When the chamber door finally opened, the light from their helmets was blinding.

They told me I was lucky. Said the geo event collapsed the main

haulage drive. Some didn’t make it to chambers in time.

I asked about Davey when I reached the surface. They found his helmet. Nothing else. Like the mine swallowed him whole.

Management called it a “displacement event.” Said he was likely buried beneath twenty meters of rock. No chance of recovery. I didn’t argue. Just nodded.

They didn’t mention the tapping.

Neither did I.

I’m back on shift now. Few weeks later. Same cycle. Same crew… Short a few names.

But sometimes, when I’m loading charges alone, I catch myself listening to the silence again.

Just in case it taps back.